

Want to Be Less Racist? Move to Hawaii

The “aloha spirit” may hold a deep lesson for all of us.

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Photographs by Damon Winter

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HONOLULU — Kristin Pauker still remembers her uncle’s warning about Dartmouth. “It’s a white institution,” he said. “You’re going to feel out of place.”

Dr. Pauker, who is now a psychology professor, is of mixed ancestry, her mother of Japanese descent and her father white from an Italian-Irish background. Applying to colleges, she was keen to leave Hawaii for the East Coast, eager to see something new and different. But almost immediately after she arrived on campus in 1998, she understood what her uncle had meant.

She encountered a barrage of questions from fellow students. *What was her ethnicity? Where was she from? Was she Native Hawaiian?* The questions seemed innocent on the surface, but she sensed that the students were really asking what box to put her in. And that categorization would determine how they treated her. “It opened my eyes to the fact that not everyone sees race the same way,” she told me.

Back in Hawaii, being mixed was so common as to be nearly unremarkable. Many of her friends were some mixture of East Asian ethnicities, white, Filipino, Hawaiian and more, and for the most part, everyone hung out with everyone else. The Dartmouth student body, on the other hand, seemed self-segregated. The nonwhite students primarily stuck with their own race — blacks sat with blacks in the cafeteria, Asians with Asians, Native Americans with Native Americans. (Dartmouth, which was around 75 percent white then, has since doubled its share of nonwhite students.)



Shanti Grimmer, left (Indian/English/Swedish/French/German), and her mother Meredith Grimmer (English/French/German/Swedish)





Philip Martin (African-American/Italian)

For the first time in her life, she wasn't sure where she belonged, and she found herself wondering: *Does it have to be like this?*

A few years later, as a graduate student in psychology at Tufts, she began her first study probing that question. Psychologists argue that “essentialist” thinking — ideas about human beings’ unchangeable essence, their inherent inferiority or the threat they supposedly pose — makes racism possible. Dr. Pauker wanted to know when children started expressing essentialist views of race.

She found that between ages 4 and 11, upper-middle-class children from mostly white neighborhoods around Boston increasingly viewed race as a permanent condition and expressed stereotypes about other racial groups: that blacks were aggressive or, on the flip side, good at basketball; that Asians were submissive and good at math. These children came from public schools in liberal areas. They probably weren't deliberately taught these stereotypes at home. But they absorbed them from the American ether nonetheless.

Would children in Hawaii express the same views? Dr. Pauker repeated the study with middle- and upper-middle-class grade-school students in and around Honolulu, and was not entirely surprised to find that in Hawaii, the children, including those who were white, tended not to express the same essentialist ideas about race. They were not race-blind. They recognized skin color, hair texture and other features commonly associated with race. But they did not attribute to race the inherent qualities — aggression or book smarts — that their mainland brethren did. “They didn't believe that race was biological,” Dr. Pauker told me.



Chainton Sadebar (Hawaiian/Filipino/Spanish/Chinese/Italian)



Imani Altemus-Williams (Black/Jewish/Native American)

She had a hypothesis to explain the difference. Whites dominated in the Boston area schools, but were a minority in Hawaii, and always had been. Hawaii also had the highest percentage of mixed-race people by a long shot in the country. (Among them was our first mixed-race president, Barack Obama, who was born there.) Mixed-race people, who make up nearly a quarter of Hawaii's population of 1.4 million, serve as a kind of jamming mechanism for people's race radar, Dr. Pauker thinks. Because if you can't tell what people are by looking at them — if their very existence blurs the imagined boundaries between supposedly separate groups — then race becomes a less useful way to think about people.

I'm interested in all of this partly because I myself come from a mixed background. I have an Ashkenazi Jewish father and a Puerto Rican mother (neither of which, I should point out, is a race). I first came across Dr. Pauker some years ago while researching mixed-race identity formation. The question of how people from mixed backgrounds create their identity has, until recently, mostly been ignored by psychologists. The assumption has been that mixed-race people likely have a difficult time because they're from (at least) two cultures but inhabit a world that often requires total allegiance to one group or another. And there's some truth to this. Researchers have documented how the unique challenges encountered by mixed people can, depending on the social context, negatively affect their mental health.

But Dr. Pauker belongs to a small group of psychologists, many of them mixed themselves, who have begun to explore the advantages of being multiracial. For instance, Sarah Gaither at Duke, a frequent collaborator of Dr. Pauker's, has discovered that, when reminded of their multiracial heritage, mixed-race individuals score higher on tests that measure creativity. This is probably not because they are inherently superior in some way, but because the very thing that's so difficult for them — the need to navigate multiple worlds — may actually enhance mental flexibility.



Pono Peterson (White/Black/Filipino)



Luanna Peterson (White/Black/Filipino)

Plenty of research indicates that diversity has many benefits. Diverse groups are better at problem-solving; in mock trials, diverse juries give fairer verdicts; diverse companies are more profitable; researchers argue that diverse countries have stronger economies. And the United States is not only becoming more diverse, it's also growing more mixed. Mixed-race people are among the fastest-growing segments of the population — between 2.6 percent and 6.9 percent of the population, depending on the study. By 2060, the segment is projected to double.

And yet, at the same time, we seem to be in the throes of a backlash against diversity, against mixing, with many people trying to claw their way back to a largely mythical, more homogeneous past. Could Hawaii show us another way forward? I flew there to find out.

One day, I sat down under an enormous tree on the University of Hawaii at Manoa campus and tried to count the people I saw walking with companions of different racial backgrounds. One of Dr. Pauker's arguments about what makes Hawaii special is that people have numerous cross-group acquaintances. Forty percent end up marrying someone from outside their own group.

The campus was clearly diverse, but I quickly realized the assumption underlying my fieldwork was fatally flawed. Here I was trying to discern ancestry, but how was I to know anyone's background just by looking, particularly in a place where people were so mixed?

My gaffe got me musing about the many assumptions we inherit about race without really thinking.



Kelani T. Burke (Native American/ Hawaiian/Azorean/Irish/German/Scandinavian/Japanese)



Joshua Sojot (Hawaiian/Filipino/Portuguese)

One of the more pernicious myths to take root in the modern mind is that racism is human nature, that it's an inevitable part of who we are, a product of our evolution. You've probably heard the argument. We're group animals. We instinctually divide the world into "us" and "them." Groups compete with one another. They invariably enter into conflict. Even chimpanzee "tribes" wage war with one another, after all. We're thus doomed to look down on people we're not familiar with — to "otherize," in modern academic jargon, those who don't look or speak like us.

In reality, this is only part of the story. In the 1960s, the social psychologist Marilynn Brewer tested the idea that human cultures naturally divided the world into in-groups and out-groups, and that they instinctually despised people who were unfamiliar. She and her colleagues conducted interviews with people in 19 non-Western cultures. Yes, some were hostile to other groups. But many actually respected and admired them. Their attitude was, to quote one respondent, "We have our ways and they have their ways."

"The assumption that groups are competitive, that out-group hate is a correlate of in-group love, that it's built on our evolution as a social species — it's just not true," Dr. Brewer told me.



Aisha Sugiyama-Bakrim (English/Scottish/Irish/Spanish/Japanese/Moroccan)



Kawika Okamoto (Irish/German/Okinawan/Hawaiian)

The idea of race as an essential aspect of one's personhood didn't always dominate, even in the West. Some ancient Greeks ascribed human differences in skin tone and hair texture to climate, an idea that's similar to the modern scientific understanding of the variation that underlies what we call race. That doesn't mean that the Greeks saw all humans as equal. They had plenty of slaves. Women were second-class citizens. And they divided the world into Greek, or civilized, and barbarian. Being civilized was clearly superior. But being barbarian wasn't an inescapable condition, the way many would come to think of race in the United States.

Centuries later, the Romans had a similar view, dividing people not by skin color, but by whether they were Romanized or non-Romanized. Again, these differences were not seen as inherent. The Romanized Gauls used to be like the non-Romanized Germans, Julius Caesar observed during his military campaigns in Western and Central Europe. People could change. A Celt or Egyptian who moved to Rome would, you'd expect, become just as Roman as the next guy.

When did this more flexible understanding of race begin to harden? Some historians point to the 14th century as a turning point. Until then, Jews in Europe had some legal rights. But in 1348, the plague struck. Many believed that the Jews were responsible; they began to move away from the view that Jews were people who merely had a different religion and toward the idea that they were inherently corrupt and dangerous.

Then came the African slave trade of the 16th century. In earlier times, slaves often came from Eastern Europe. (The word "slave" is related to "Slav.") But with the discovery of the Americas and the surge in demand for labor, slavers set their sights on sub-Saharan Africa. They justified this plundering of humanity with arguments about the supposed inferiority and bestiality of Africans. In the United States, these ideas would evolve into a sadistic paternalism — that slavery was actually good for Africans because they were incapable of self-governance.



Tia Marie Masaniai-Estrera (Hawaiian/Samoan/Filipino/Chinese/Spanish/German/Caucasian)



Logan Paracuelles (Filipino/Japanese/Mexican)

These ideas — and probably all racist ideas — served a clear purpose: to buttress an economic system that depended on free labor. As Ibram X. Kendi pointed out in his book “Stamped From the Beginning,” hate does not necessarily precede racism. Instead, societies often spin racist ideas out of self-interest — to further political or economic goals — and these ideas then lead to hate.

But even with the major effort that went into promoting the racial hierarchy, in the early Colonial period, poor whites frequently mingled and found common cause with African-Americans. Late-17th-century Colonial Virginia had a thriving multiracial population. Long before Karl Marx’s class-based critique of capitalism, poor whites and blacks joined forces in several rebellions. The most famous was Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, in which indentured white servants and free and enslaved blacks took up arms against Virginia’s governor but were crushed.

This revolt shook the elites, who worked even harder to enforce the color lines. A series of laws meant to prevent interracial mingling (and to clearly define blacks as property, not citizens) went into effect. A white person in Virginia could be banished from the colony for having a child with a black or biracial person. White men might be whipped.

The reason given for these laws was some version of wanting to prevent the “abominable mixture” of the races. But the true purpose was to keep the structures of race intact in the American mind so that the economy, which depended on stolen labor, could continue whirring along.



Malia Connor, left, and her daughter Oni Masai Connor (Black/Hawaiian/Chinese/Filipino/First Nation)



Catherine Freyja Sagrado Hobro (Filipino/Spanish/Chinese)

Which brings us back to Hawaii. Dr. Pauker runs the Intergroup Social Perception Lab at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Maybe her most intriguing finding is that Hawaii can rub off on visitors, changing how they think about race.

Some years ago, she began following 143 white college students from the mainland who'd come to Hawaii to study. Over time, she discovered, many of them lost the essentialist ideas that characterized their thinking about race when they'd just arrived. Dr. Pauker gauged this shift with a widely used questionnaire called the "Race Conception Scale." It asks subjects to assess, on a seven-point scale, statements like "racial groups are primarily determined by biology" and "a person's race is fixed at birth." The mainland students began to think about race more like students in Hawaii did — as a fluid concept.

There are many reasons for this transformation, she thinks. White mainland students often find themselves in the minority for the first time in their lives. And it's not always easy. Just as students of color often drop out at a higher rate than whites from universities on the mainland, at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, it's white students who drop out at higher rates.

The statistic hints at what the white mainland students are going through. They are escaping, probably for the first time, what sociologists call "white transparency." Whiteness stops being invisible to them; they suddenly perceive themselves as having a color — a race. And if they're going to have friends, they're forced to socialize with nonwhites, which means pushing past their preconceptions.



Brady Punu, left, and Brendan Punu (Italian/Irish/Azorean/Filipino/Niuean)



Erica Martin (Chinese/Italian/Finnish) with her son Tre Martin (Chinese/Italian/Finnish/African-American)

All of this is likely humbling and occasionally painful. But pain can mean growth. “It’s sort of like when you go and exercise,” Dr. Pauker told me. “Unless you tire your muscles out and experience some pain and discomfort, you’re not going to get any benefit.”

Most remarkably, as these students’ ideas about race relax, Dr. Pauker finds that they score higher on other tests of cognitive flexibility. They become more creative problem-solvers.

When Dr. Pauker and I discussed this over a poke bowl — a Hawaiian dish with East Asian influences that has become popular on the mainland, too — it brought to mind something James Baldwin said decades ago: Racism exacts a toll on those who are racist, distorting their humanity and hindering their ability to be fully self-reflective beings. That’s surely no consolation to the victims of racism, but Dr. Pauker’s findings seem to confirm Baldwin’s thesis. The mental rigidity required to harbor racist ideas ends up bleeding over into other cognitive domains.

“In lots of circumstances, rigidity is helpful,” Dr. Pauker told me, because it conserves mental energy. In theory, racial categorizing is supposed to work like a shorthand, helping us determine how to interact with people while expending minimal energy figuring out who they actually are. The problem, though, is that our perception of race and what it means is based on a model of the world that’s almost always incorrect, and often entirely fabricated.



Lyric Amanonce (Filipino/Irish/Japanese/Chinese)



Howard Dela Fuente (Spanish/Portuguese/German)

Dr. Pauker's studies have important caveats. White students who have come here from the mainland are, almost by definition, already an open-minded, adventurous bunch. Maybe it's not so surprising that for them, spending time in a nonmajority-white place would change how they think about race. The real trick would be to get a white supremacist to enroll here and see if there was the same transformation.

And Hawaii the harmonious melting pot is also a cliché in its own right. Even in the early 20th century, mainland sociologists observing Hawaii marveled at how its different groups seemed to get along so well. They pointed to the archipelago, then a United States territory, as a vision of the future of civilization.

"We seem to be brought, so to speak, into the very presence of the historical process, where we may observe civilization as it evolves under something like laboratory conditions," wrote the University of Chicago sociologist Robert Park in 1937 about Hawaii. In 1925, the sociologist Romanzo Adams put it this way: "There is abundant evidence that the peoples of Hawaii are in process of becoming one people."



Vincent Santos, left (Filipino/Chinese), and Von Ka'ana'ana (Hawaiian/Chinese/Maori/French)



Zyah Sojot (Hawaiian/Filipino/Italian/Portuguese/Puerto Rican)

The interracial harmony that supposedly reigned was cited by other mainlanders to make more self-serving arguments. During World War II, the fact that people of Japanese descent, then the largest ethnic group on the islands, were loyal Americans was held up as evidence that the United States was not, as Japanese propaganda claimed, engaged in a racial war with Japan. During the Cold War, as communism spread in Asia, Americans pointed to Hawaii as evidence that Asians and other nonwhites could be well integrated into American society. And during the civil rights era, Hawaii was held up as a place where nonwhite people were happy with their lot. Why couldn't African-Americans be more like them? (In fact, partly inspired by the civil rights movement of the mainland, Native Hawaiians led a Hawaiian Renaissance in the 1970s.)

Many Hawaiian academics are understandably sick of their state being seen by outsiders as a model of racial harmony. They view it as a fantasy that papers over very real inequities. "We shouldn't glorify ourselves," Jonathan Y. Okamura, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, told me. "We need to work on the ways in which we continue to foster unequal opportunities for groups here."



Ricki Sanchez (Mexican/Polish/Greek/Irish)



Joshua Parker (Hawaiian/Chinese/Irish/German/Portuguese/English)

Prejudice against Micronesians, a recent immigrant group, is openly expressed, for example. People say things about them — calling them cockroaches and pushing for their genocide — “that would not fly anywhere else in this day and age,” Sha Merirei Ongelungel, an artist and activist of Palauan descent, told me. Disgusted by this behavior, she created the Twitter hashtag #BeingMicronesian for people to share their experiences of prejudice.

Being African-American isn’t easy in Hawaii, either, said Akiemi Glenn, executive director of the Popolo Project in Honolulu. Stereotypes about African-Americans abound, she told me, in part because so few black people live on the islands to push back against them.

Nonetheless, Ms. Glenn, whose family is from North Carolina, said that there is a complexity here that’s lacking on the mainland. Ms. Glenn has Chinese, Native American, African and European ancestors. Back in North Carolina, she’s just black. There’s no room to claim her Chinese ancestry. But in Hawaii it often becomes a way to find common ground with others. “There are spaces for people to acknowledge their diverse genealogy,” Ms. Glenn told me.

How did this space open up in Hawaii? Historians I asked pointed with reverence to one thing: the union organizing that occurred here in the postwar period.

In the late 19th century, Hawaii was a constitutional monarchy, ruled by a Hawaiian monarch. That ended in 1893 when a group of mostly white plantation owners, descended from an earlier wave of missionaries, overthrew the Hawaiian queen and declared, perversely, a republic. Their goal was annexation by the United States, which occurred in 1898, and access to its markets.



Kesha Unciano (Filipino/Cuban/Chinese)



Adam Keawe Manolo-Camp (Hawaiian/Filipino)

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, plantation owners imported workers from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Puerto Rico and as far away as Portugal. They believed that, divided by different languages and cultures, the workers would be less likely to conspire together and cause trouble. Ethnic and racial stereotyping was widespread. The Chinese “coolies” were cast as depraved gamblers; the Filipinos as prone to violence; the Japanese as cliquish and loyal only to the ascendant Japanese empire. The Portuguese, who tended to have higher-ranking jobs than everyone else, were a lesser form of white — better than the “Asiatics” they managed, but not quite good enough to join the Anglo-Saxon elite. Native Hawaiians, meanwhile, were seen as good-natured but lazy, and in need of white paternalism.

But after World War II, in the space of a few years, this social order rapidly changed. The San Francisco-based International Longshore and Warehouse Union began organizing plantation, dock and other workers in Hawaii, who often labored in wretched conditions. Success would require interracial unity, union organizers quickly realized. The workers needed to overcome the ethnic divisions of plantation society.

The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, sociologist Moon-Kie Jung describes what followed as “proto affirmative action.” To build a union everyone would buy into, all ethnic groups had to be equally represented. And so union leadership positions were deliberately parceled out among ethnic groups.



Laurien Baird Hokuli'i Helfrich-Nus (German/Portuguese/Puerto Rican/Norwegian)



Blake La Benz (Filipino/Japanese/German/Portuguese)

Not everyone in Hawaii was a longshoreman or plantation worker, of course. Yet that epoch of deliberate restructuring of the working class, Professor Okamura and others say, had a long-lasting effect on Hawaiian society. The effort succeeded in getting better working conditions from the “big five” sugar and fruit companies that ruled the economy. Organized labor became a political force, helping to usher the Democratic Party into power in 1954. The party, which has largely dominated the state ever since, passed a series of progressive laws leading to investment in public education and a higher minimum wage, and the state in 1974 became the first to mandate employer-provided health insurance. (The progressive tradition continues today: An early challenge to President Trump’s Muslim travel ban came from Hawaii.)

We might call this the Marxist reading on what went *right* in Hawaii. Working-class Hawaiians realized that race was being used to divide them — keeping them from improving their lot. Dr. Brewer, the social psychologist, described this transformation as labor successfully creating a new “super ordinate” identity that cut across racial lines. That new identity did not totally erase old divisions, but it superseded them, at least for a while. (It probably also helped that Hawaii never had any laws against miscegenation.)



Dean Endo (Japanese/Korean)



Alexa Taylor Nelson (Adopted from Russia)

In recent decades, the legacy of labor organizing has begun to fray, says Professor Okamura. Hawaii now has a high proportion of students in private school. Its public schools have become more racially and ethnically segregated, preventing the intergroup relationships that he thinks were so important in the past. But he says the history of organized labor in Hawaii suggests that you can, by deliberately dismantling racial barriers and fostering opportunity for everyone, change race relations in society.

One other holdover from Hawaii's plantation past, when laborers of different backgrounds worked closely together, is a tradition of ethnic joke-telling.

Hawaii is not a politically correct society where everyone is “woke.” On the contrary, ethnic jokes are so common it can be jarring for people who aren't from Hawaii. (Here's one from the well-known Hawaiian-born comedian Frank De Lima, who himself has Portuguese ancestry: “Why did the Portagee water half of his lawn? He heard there was a 50 percent chance of rain.”)

Dr. Pauker's lab hasn't formally studied this — and there is academic debate about how benign these ethnic jokes really are — but she thinks that the tradition may do some good.

Liberal parents often claim they're blind to race, that they don't see it. But Dr. Pauker has found that, on the mainland, this may paradoxically allow stereotypes to creep into children's understanding of race. If you don't actively shape how children think about race, they may be more likely to absorb hurtful and damaging clichés from the social ether.



Madelyn Fell (Spanish/Filipino/Chinese/German/Irish/French/Serbian)



Bibi Fell with her daughter Madelyn (Spanish/Filipino/Chinese/German/Irish/French)

Partly because of racial joking, race is always on the mind here. When people think about race consciously, she posits, it helps prevent essentialist thinking from taking root unconsciously. Joking about ethnic stereotypes, especially about one's own group, at least keeps conversations about race in Hawaii on the surface, rather than pushing them underground.

People are frank about other aspects of race as well in Hawaii. When she grew up, she recalls, people often referred to her as "that hapa girl" ('hapa' means "half" in Hawaiian pidgin), and she didn't think twice about it. Maybe that's because so many others were also hapa. Or perhaps that nonchalance is because this racial ribbing didn't occur against a background of any clear majority.

An intriguing finding from Dr. Pauker's lab is that kids in Hawaii are terrible at defining other people's race compared with kids on the mainland. That's not because they don't see the features usually associated with race. It's because, when shown photos, they complicate their answers. Whereas a kid on the mainland might simply say "Asian," in Hawaii, kids tend to say something like, "Japanese, Chinese, Filipino and Norwegian." Instead of labeling a face "white" and leaving it at that, they might offer "Scottish, Irish, German and Italian." They are like fine wine connoisseurs while everyone else drinks cheap beer. From an early age, they see race as something complex and full of nuance, not something simple or black and white.



Malaika Peterson (White/Black/ Filipino)



Kai Brandjes (European/African)

But if Dr. Pauker and her colleagues are right that increased diversity and mixing help quash racism, why is the mainland now experiencing what feels like a resurgence of tribalism?

Dr. Pauker's answer is that while, yes, the United States has become more diverse, Americans have also become more ideologically segregated from one another, making the kinds of meaningful interactions that erode racial thinking less likely. Part of that segregation comes from the news we watch, which has become more Balkanized. Part of it is the echo chamber of social media, which reflects back our own views. But another big reason may be the apparent absence of a larger umbrella identity — an American identity — that can supersede and contain tribal identities.

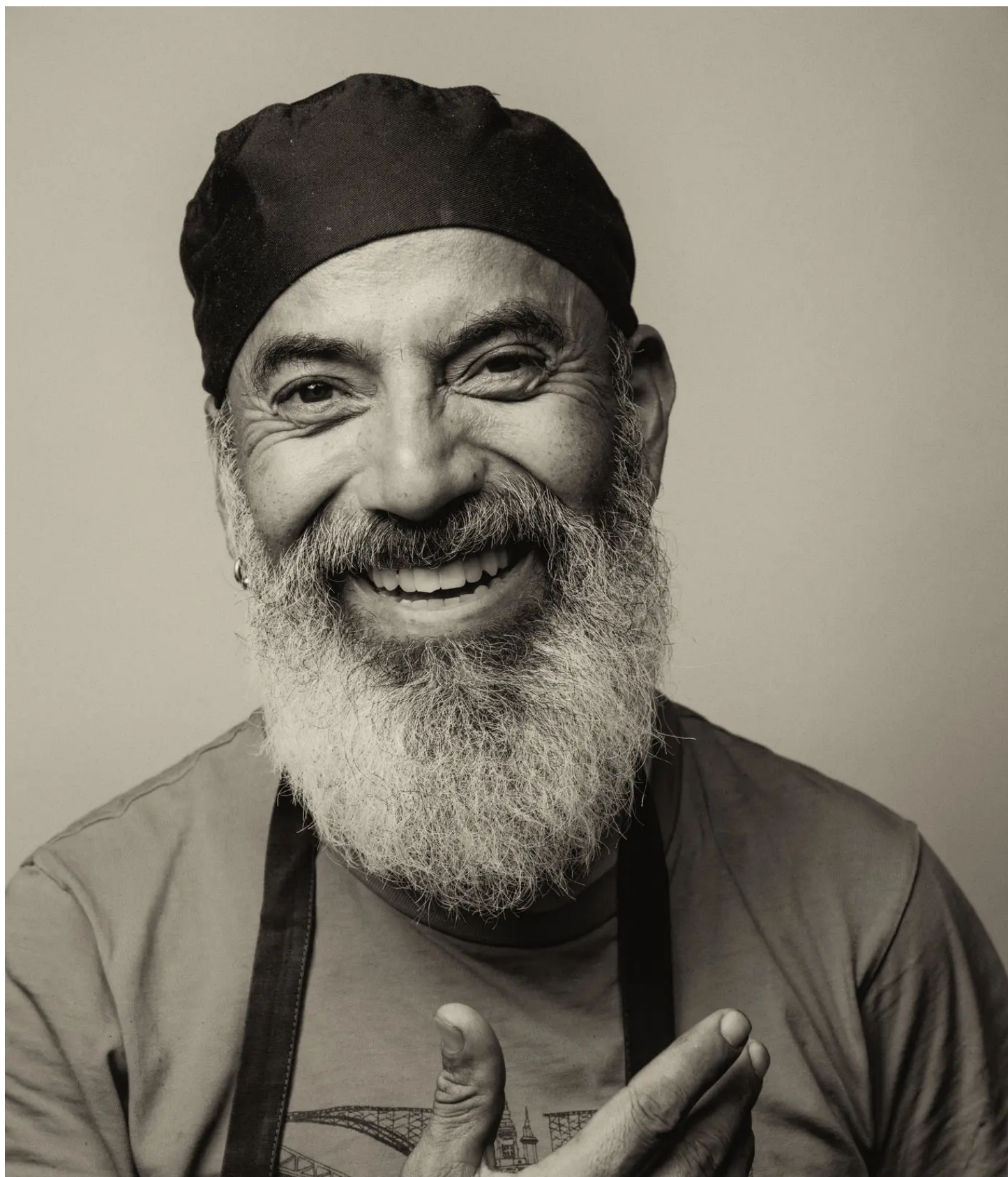
As it happens, Hawaii has that, too — an identity that, despite the efforts to prevent its emergence, coalesced among plantation workers. It's exemplified in the "aloha spirit," a concept roughly defined as an emphasis on mutual respect, getting along and taking care of one another, and in Hawaiian pidgin, the language people from many different backgrounds working on the plantation created to communicate. This identity is simply called "local."

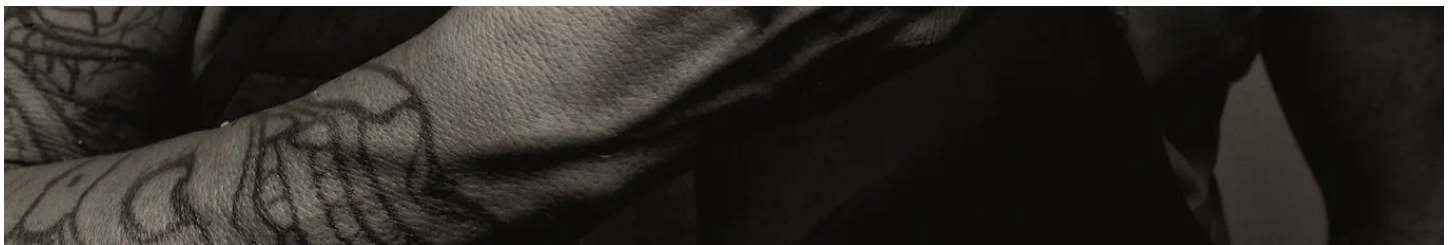
But are any of these lessons really applicable on the mainland, or anywhere else?

Hawaii is unique historically, demographically and perhaps most crucially, geographically. Justin Gest, a political scientist at George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government who studies the evolution of island societies, told me that islands, separated as they are from currents on the mainland, are often unique laboratories of human culture, caldrons where ingredients from different cultures recombine into something new. Living on a small, circumscribed piece of land marooned in the sea, Dr. Pauker points out, forces you to interact with your neighbors in ways that may not occur on continents. And when destructive forces threaten to tear society apart, those relationships matter.



Taryn Bell (African-American/British)





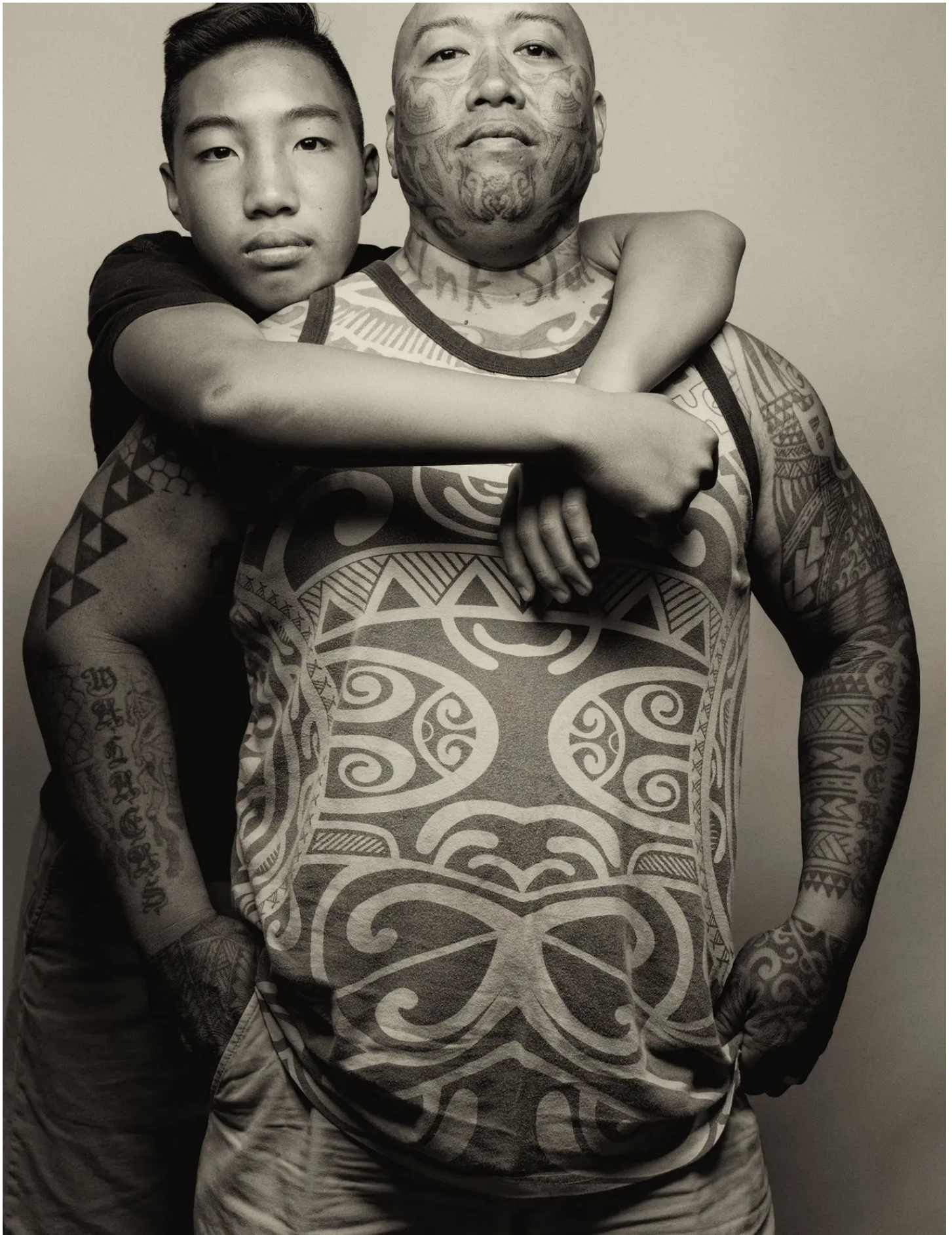
Alfredo Lee Conti (Italian/Mexican)

Consider what happened with the detention of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Worried about espionage and worse, the government rounded up and interned about 120,000 Japanese-Americans on the mainland. Hawaii arrested far fewer, about 1,800 — and that was despite the fact that some 150,000 people of Japanese ancestry then lived on the islands, and that Japanese planes had just bombed Pearl Harbor. What was different?

The officials in charge in Hawaii had deep connections with the local Japanese community. Robert Shivers, who headed Honolulu's F.B.I. office, and who had been dispatched from the mainland precisely to surveil the Japanese in the lead-up to World War II, had a young Japanese student living in his house, whom he would refer to as his adopted daughter. John Burns, the head of the Honolulu Police Department's Espionage Bureau, who grew up in Hawaii and would become the state's second governor, also had deep ties in the Japanese community. Both resisted calls from Washington to intern the Japanese, a story told by the journalist Tom Coffman in his book "The Island Edge of America." They also belonged to a multiethnic group called the Council for Interracial Unity, which had convened precisely to prevent the implosion of Hawaiian society in the event of war with Japan.



Lauren Moana Imada (Japanese/Chinese/Hawaiian/Spanish)



Maka Sagocio (Filipino) and his son Justus Sagocio (Filipino/Chinese/Japanese/Okinawan/Hawaiian/Portuguese)

This brings me back to the “aloha spirit,” which may hold a deeper lesson for all of us. This tradition, several people told me, came from Native Hawaiian culture. Professor Okamura, who otherwise pooh-poohed the idea of Hawaiian racial harmony, related how Native Hawaiians offered his great-grandmother food when she first arrived from Japan. Mr. Burns, who was governor from 1962 to 1974, recalled Hawaiians inviting him to eat as he wandered the beach as a boy. The mother of Daniel Inouye, the senator from Hawaii, was adopted and raised by a Native Hawaiian family — something she often reminded him of.

Separately, these are all just heartwarming anecdotes. But together they suggest that even as Hawaii was subject to the divisive forces roiling the world, a different set of local customs coursing beneath the surface served as a type of counterbalance. Where did they come from?

When Capt. James Cook first arrived in Hawaii in 1778, between 200,000 and 800,000 people lived in the archipelago. (Huge swaths of the population later succumbed to diseases the Westerners brought with them.) Polynesians may have first come to the islands as early as 1,700 years ago. Over the centuries, they developed elaborate methods of agricultural and resource management. They irrigated fields of taro, sugar cane, sweet potato and coconut trees with intricate ditches. Along the shore, they built fish ponds. They prohibited fishing in the ocean during certain seasons, an ancient form of sustainable fishery management.



Ikaika Aranda (Hawaiian/Filipino/Chinese/white)



Gioia Martin (African-American/Chinese/Italian/Finnish)

And, crucially, the Hawaiians traded and shared among themselves — because to survive, they had to. People from the uplands exchanged sweet potato for fish with people from the coasts. A cultural norm of hospitality emerged. The islands weren't a utopia, of course. They experienced wars and occasional famines, and even had a kind of untouchable caste. But a premium was placed on getting along — the “aloha spirit.”

“I don't want to sound like a tourist commercial,” Davianna Pomaikai McGregor, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, said as she explained this to me. “But I think the Native Hawaiian people and the practice of aloha set the framework” for race relations on the islands.

The reason it sounds like a TV jingle is that it has become one: “Aloha” is a marketing gimmick for the state's primary industry, tourism. A cartoonish version blares at visitors the moment they get off the plane, often in the form of dancers in grass skirts. Everyone I spoke to with Native ancestry found this irritating and sometimes insulting. One, a university student, told me that she felt like “aloha” was used to make Native Hawaiians invisible in their own land. So it's important to understand what's missing from the tourist version. “You're supposed to give back, not just take take take,” Mahesh Cleveland, a Hawaiian-born lawyer with Native ancestry, told me. “There is an expectation of reciprocity.”

As an explanation about why race relations are different in Hawaii, the “aloha spirit” is actually quite profound. It suggests that attitudes about other people stem, in part, from our understanding of the ecological limits of the world we inhabit. If you think that the resources of the world are limitless and that you don't really need other people to survive — that they're disposable because the bounty is endless — you may be inclined to treat people as things. But if you're aware of how much you depend on others and how small and fragile the world is, you're likely to have a very different approach to human relationships.

Traditions of hospitality toward the stranger exist in many cultures. They're central to Christianity, for instance. But for the past 500 years of European and then American expansion, during which the modern race idea was forged, the idea that the world's

bounty was limitless, and that there was little downside to its relentless exploitation, has dominated. That attitude is now getting us into trouble as we change the climate.

If we could begin to grasp the limits of the planet we live on, if we could understand that the earth itself is an island and that we are all dependent on one another for survival, perhaps we would see each other differently, too — and have less use for the very idea of race.

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